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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: RARE PRESIDENTIAL INTERVIEW SPARKS
SPECULATION ABOUT A DEFENSIVE KOCHARIAN

REF: YEREVAN 347

1. (U) Sensitive But Unclassified. Please treat accordingly.

SUMMARY

2. (SBU) President Robert Kocharian's February 18 extended press conference sparked speculation about his political posturing vis-a-vis an increasingly vocal opposition. During the rare two-hour TV interview, Kocharian took pains to portray himself as a calm, unfettered executive in charge of his country. He covered the entire range of political issues, dedicating significant time to U.S.-Armenia relations, Nagorno-Karabakh negotiations and corruption. He suggested that the decline in USG military assistance to Armenia may have resulted from Armenia's lukewarm response to coalition calls for help with the war in Iraq. His sharp criticism of local opposition leaders included a reprimand for the controversial January speeches by opposition parliamentarians at the Parliamentary Council of the Council of Europe (PACE). Kocharian's nonchalant performance notwithstanding, his rare decision to go on the offensive may indicate that he (or those close to him) senses the need to maintain a firm grip on public perception. End Summary.

UNCOMMON AIR TIME FOR KOCHARIAN

3. (SBU) President Robert Kocharian's two-hour television interview February 18 was his most extensive press availability since the 2003 presidential elections. Four local journalists from mostly pro-government television stations participated in the interview. Kocharian took pains to portray himself as a calm, unfettered executive in charge of his country during his mostly unrehearsed responses to journalists' questions. Media analysts noted Kocharian's efforts to minimize bombastic language and called his interview "loaded" with nuanced messages to opposition leaders and the international community.

A NOT-SO-SUBTLE WARNING TO THE OPPOSITION

4. (SBU) Kocharian acknowledged the increased chatter in the political community about opposition initiatives to oust him from power. Kocharian stated unequivocally that the GOAM would counter extra-constitutional measures and warned that "we [the government] have the resources" to quell such movements. Kocharian categorized opposition protest methods as cowardly, including the call for street protests and rallies. He had harsh words for opposition parliamentarians who openly criticized his administration during January 2004 meetings of the Parliamentary Commission of the Council of Europe (PACE). Kocharian stopped just short of daring the opposition to put legal mechanisms of impeachment or national referendum into play. (Note: Kocharian is well aware that the pro-government majority in parliament would not allow such legal maneuvering at this time. End Note.)

MISQUOTE ON US-ARMENIA RELATIONS

5. (SBU) Kocharian responded to journalists' questions regarding U.S.-Armenia relations by defending his administration's policy of "complementarity" with Russia and the U.S. When asked whether or not the GOAM was worried about a

perceived increase in U.S. interest in the Caucasus, Kocharian replied, "The increase in the USG's role in the South Cacasus can favor Armenia, including the settlement of the N-K conflict." (Note: The President's response was widely misquoted in Armenia the following day, implying a more negative answer. This error has yet to be clarified by the President's office, but sources in Diaspora lobby groups tell the us that they will pressure news agencies to correct the error. End Note.)

KOCHARIAN: "INDEPENDENCE [ON IRAQ] HAD ITS PRICE"

16. (SBU) Journalists peppered Kocharian with questions about anticipated lower levels of USG military assistance to Armenia vis-a-vis USG military assistance destined for Azerbaijan. Kocharian refrained from outwardly criticizing the USG, but expressed nuanced disappointment that the USG had not "maintained its promises to the American-Armenian community." He hypothesized that the decrease in military assistance was a commensurate USG response to Armenia's lukewarm cooperation with coalition efforts during the war with Iraq. Armenia's "independence [on the Iraq issue]," he said, "had its price, and yet its value."

COMMENT: "WHY NOW?"

17. (SBU) Perhaps more important than Kocharian's remarks themselves was the timing of the press availability. This interview may have been a reaction to the opposition's recent reentry into the policy fray following the splashy January speeches at PACE and the controversial Dashnak World Congress (reftel). Alternatively, some within the Kocharian administration believe that Kocharian is irritated by the "exaggerated, overly congratulatory" attention Western governments, local opposition and policy think tanks have paid to Georgia over the past few months. This interview may have been an effort to re-establish Kocharian's political prowess and defuse any hopes for a "rose revolution" in Armenia. Lastly, some speculate that lower USG military assistance levels could be a potentially fatal policy issue for Kocharian and see the interview as a convenient way for him to pass the blame to the National Assembly and other more strongly pro-Russian political forces.

18. (SBU) Regardless of the reason, and Kocharian's nonchalant performance during the interview notwithstanding, his rare decision to go on the media offensive indicates that he, or those close to him, senses the need to maintain a firm grip on public perception. Ironically, it appears that the interview has done more to capture the attention of local conspiracy theorists than quell those who question Kocharian's authority. Although Kocharian faces a potentially trying Spring given opposition leaders' calls for increased rallies and protests, we believe the prospects for any major political upheaval remain remote.
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